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## Human Gumbo and all its Glory: taking a look at black culture and mardi gras indians in the face of erasure

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Bard

**Human Gumbo and all its Glory: Taking a Look at Black Culture and Mardi  
Gras Indians in the Face of Erasure.**

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
Of Bard College

By  
Jayde Tyranique Davis

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Life in New Orleans hasn't been a walk in the park. I survived being trapped in a Nursing home with dead bodies surrounding me; I've been displaced from my family and moved to California. Since I can remember I've been the backbone for my family I didn't plan on coming to college because I didn't know who was going to take care of my family while I would be in school. I've recently dealt with the death of my uncle and my brother, I've had recent complications with my health that has caused me to become ill, and dealing with all of this and not being able to go home is painful, but I know that home is the last place I should be. Every time I go home it seems that I get constantly weighed down. With all of this going on I still seem to love my city even though it doesn't love me back. I can't seem to back away from her because although she gave me some harsh memories the good ones outweigh the bad. New Orleans is my home, New Orleans is my identity, and New Orleans is me.

*"An Ode to New Orleans"*

I can't seem to stay away from her. I guess the music that I hear while walking in the French quarter soothes my aching soul. The sweet people with great spirits make me smile, and the amazing food just warms my body. It's something about her that I can't put my finger on. She feels like a drug that I can't rid my body of. I've tried so many times to hate this place but my heart knows where I belong. From the rich accents of my people to the different shades of brown I see everyday. She is so rich with culture and soul that I can't see myself without her.

It breaks my heart to see her being erased right in front of me. These foul people are stripping her of her roots and taking away her memories/ culture. They are making her something she is not meant to be. It only took one time for her to fall apart so that the savages could come and claim her. They sold her off like a slave at an auction block. She deserves none of this cruel treatment. Every time I visit her I see her aching and in pain, I see her quickly losing her identity. The people that took care of her before can't seem to manage the upkeep. She became a hot commodity. When I visit you now you're so unrecognizable. I really miss you old girl, but I know that all good things must come to an end. I will always remember the memories you gave me.

Farewell ole' gal you've been good to me. I'm saying goodbye because I know that I've seen better, I'm saying goodbye because I've ventured out of my comfort zone, I'm saying goodbye because I can't always be dependent on you. The pain and heartache that it took to get back to you shows you are loved. Some may say that a city can't have this much of an influence on a person, but it does.

Its been over 12 years since Hurricane has hit he city of New Orleans and it seems that from personal opinion that we all have our different ideas of what we see New Orleans as or what we see the future New Orleans as. We have seen major issues that have been the downfall/ downhill of New Orleans culture. The black culture specifically. Some issues that arise when we start to talk about the erasure of black culture is the fact that an age old tradition in New Orleans is being chewed up, spat out, and stomped on by the officials that run the city, the police departments and millennial. The issues that has to arise before we can talk about how the Mardi Gras Indians have been in the face of erasure is what evidently led to this problem in the beginning.



In a post Katrina society we see that the devastation of New Orleans has ultimately shifted the balance of things and has pushed and pulled people in and out of the city. Some of the major issues that we face is the fact that there isn't affordable housing left in New Orleans so the old residents, culture bearers, and natives are struggling to support themselves in their own city. We also see that gentrification has taken over the city and it's not the same New Orleans as it was Pre Katrina. We see a development of fancy grocery stores, pastry and coffee shops, beautification projects, a shift in how the French quarter looks and the fact that in this "new" New Orleans we see that people are getting a little too comfortable with appropriating not only black culture, but also New Orleans black culture. As I delve into the history of the Mardi Gras Indians in my Project I can't help but notice there has been a tug and a push to either keep this tradition in the city that dates back to slaves and how we honor Native American for helping us to freedom. We are lacking the knowledge that stops us from debating if we should be allowed to parade in the streets like the white people do and not get harassed in the street. If we knew how important this culture/ tradition was, we would be honoring it not debating about it.

I believe that in the formation of the "new" New Orleans individuals feel too comfortable imitating that culture we have put in place before they even started migrating to the city and taking over. These new comers have tried to mimic the Mardi Gras Indian costume to the point where each suit now has to be trademarked, and have recently filled a lawsuit against a racist club that perpetuates that idea that its ok to mock African culture of the ZULU tribe and see if they can make their own. In a failed attempt they embarrassed themselves and are now facing a major lawsuit.

Not all things in New Orleans have gone downhill. We still see a strong art presence

in New Orleans with every event/ festival gives the opportunity for local artist to sell their work and display them in museums. We have a strong presence of youth now who have taken interest in becoming artist because we as a city is very supportive of the arts in New Orleans compared to pre Katrina. We have different programs that help kids find their way into different mediums of art and also will teach you the business side of it also. This is leading to a stronger and more supportive New Orleans, and seems to be sending a positive message out to youth that you don't have to be on the streets or there are multiple support groups that will lead and mentor you while you learn to do art in the process. A progressive New Orleans is the goal in my eyes. We always have room for improvements, in all areas of New Orleans be it the culture, the people, or the state representatives. I see New Orleans as a tourist location rather than somewhere you call home now. It seems that the city is too involved in making the new wave of citizens comfortable, but forget that the natives molded and shaped this city into what it is. They are pushing the people who have made this city what it is out.

# Chapter 1: “Shalla Netu”

Mardi Gras Indians have had a long-standing history with New Orleans, but it did not necessarily start there. Formal celebration can be traced back to ancient Rome, where men in disguise roamed the streets and celebrated during the winter solstice. A couple of centuries later in medieval Europe the same form of celebration were happening, but their celebration included a king called the Lord of Misrule. During these festivities small tokens were distributed to the onlookers. The goodies dispensed by the Lord of Misrule and his court prefigures current Carnival practices of throwing treats.

Later on in France, Europe, and Italy they also acquired the same tradition of celebration but it included masked balls. Early New Orleans Creole's called them "Les Bals des Rois<sup>1</sup>" for the King who presided over the masked celebration. Later the masqued entertainment continued through "Mardi Gras" or "fat Tuesday" as New Orleanians would call it. Mardi Gras Falls between February 3rd and March 9th , always 46 days before Easter. The way that carnival came to the Crescent city<sup>2</sup> was when French-Canadian Explorer Pierre le Moyne set up camp 60 miles South of the future new Orleans. He named the site *Pointe du Mardi Gras*, which was in reference to March 3, 1699 Mardi Gras day. The Europeans brought their Carnival customs and creole society to New Orleans and soon masking and dancing at private balls became a tradition, including roaming the streets in disguise.

The masking and dancing of individuals didn't originate from Europeans, but from African-Americans and Native Americans who were enslaved. When Native Americans from the Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Blackfoot tribe were enslaved by the French, they

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<sup>1</sup> Balls of Kings in French.

<sup>2</sup> Another name for New Orleans

realized that they did not make good slaves because their love for freedom was so severe that they would run into the Bayou or disappear into the camps, which the French and later the Spanish wouldn't dare to venture into. Since they needed individuals for labor, a call was made to the governor to bring African slaves to the area since they were known to be better workers, and were believed to not be able to survive the swamps. For a couple of years Native Indians, and Haitian slaves were trained in running the plantations. Slowly the slaves and Indians began to understand each other's language and this led to their efforts to work in harmony, this communication also help them make plans for escapes. This bond that they shared frightened the whites because the last thing they needed was for them to become allies. In 1729 African American slaves joined forces with the Natchez Indians to revolt against the French because they wanted to develop a tobacco industry on sacred land, this led to the "Natchez revolt". In return for the African- Americans help, the Indians promised them freedom. This revolt backfired because a slave overheard their plans and betrayed them. The revolt was put down and the results were brutal, many Africans and Indians lost their lives that day. That method was not so successful, so they didn't try anything for the next two years. The French were convinced that the slaves were under control and allowed them to gather and dance on the plantations again.

The gathering of Negroes became very popular in 1744; this took place in Congo Square in New Orleans. This was a place to meet, to sell and produce goods to accumulate money, and buy their freedom sometimes. They would gather by the hundreds on Sunday afternoons to sing and dance in their traditional style. Slaves weren't just celebrating but they were planning another escape. They relied heavily on the Native Americans to help

them negotiate the swamps and guide them to the maroon camps<sup>3</sup>. It was at this time when Africans were very thankful to have such allies and to show their appreciation; slaves would dress as Indians to celebrate Mardi Gras in their unique customary fashion. This was the beginning of “the dressing of” the black Mardi Gras Indian.

To further this tradition and sharing of cultures, free men of color would host parties in the back areas of the city by the maroon camps. They would celebrate Mardi Gras in their own way because slaves weren’t allowed to celebrate with whites or in white neighborhoods. They would still dress up as Indians while adopting their new ways, but because of the increased amount of escapes and the sneaking into balls the Spanish Administration prohibited black persons from being masked, wearing feathers, and attending night balls. They could only dress and roam in black neighborhoods and in Congo Square. Because of a slave revolt in 1811 all gatherings by slaves and free men were prohibited, this ended the masking by the Indians in Congo Square. They weren’t going to let the militia stop them so they altered their plans and routes to remain undiscovered and this eventually sent them into deep hiding because the risk were too great of them getting caught.

The art was still practiced and by 1835 they fully resurfaced back into New Orleans. The Mardi Gras Indians are, in a large part, made-up of the inner city blacks of New Orleans. They have paraded for well over two centuries. Historically slavery and racism were at the root of this cultural separation and that’s why there are no White Mardi Gras Indians. The black neighborhoods of New Orleans developed their own style of

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<sup>3</sup> A place where Africans escaped.

celebrating Mardi Gras. They developed “krewes”<sup>4</sup>, which are named after imaginary Indian tribes in regards to what ward<sup>5</sup> you live in or what gang you are associated with. They name themselves after natives to pay homage/ respect for their assistance in escaping the brutality of slavery. It was Indians who accepted slaves into their Society when blacks made a break for freedom; they have never forgotten their support. These Indians predominantly participate in black parades such as NOMTOC, Endymion, Bacchus, Zulu, Rex, Elks, Krewe of Crescent City, Oshun, and Muses.

Mardi Gras Indians have been parading in New Orleans since before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is said that this tradition originated from a similarity between Africans and Indians as fellow outcasts of society. Some influence came from *Buffalo Bill's Wild Wild West show* in the 1880s because it drew attention to the masking<sup>6</sup> of Indians for Mardi Gras. Because of Buffalo Bill's influence it flowers back up again in the 1890's due to *Sitting Bull* and the belief that Native Americans coming back as stars and something beautiful. Black Indians picked up on the spirit of these warriors<sup>7</sup>, and this is what posses Mardi Gras Indians on Mardi Gras day<sup>8</sup>. There is also a Caribbean influence because when they started to spring up in New Orleans and create different communities, their culture was incorporated into the suits, dances and music made by the Indians.

There are different aspects of the suits in earlier years that played a huge role. Feathers were/ are the main aspect of the suit. The significance of feathers that are incorporated in a Mardi Gras suit comes from Native Americans. They believed that feathers are gifts

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<sup>4</sup> New Orleans way of spelling “crew”

<sup>5</sup> The different districts in New Orleans

<sup>6</sup> The act of suiting up as an Indian

<sup>7</sup> This is what the Mardi Gras Indians say

<sup>8</sup> Also came around in the same year

from the sky, sea, and trees, and that they arrive unexpectedly, but not without purpose. Feathers are tied to the belief that birds, as a spirit guide, walk you through different stages of life with a person, teaching and guiding them and protecting them. The feathers symbolize traits such as trust, strength, honor, wisdom, power and freedom. The Native American women incorporated this feathering of the body to their husbands because they believed that they encompassed all those traits. When they were married there was a sacred dance performed called “*The Bamboula Dance*”<sup>9</sup>, this took place in Congo Square. It was the first recording in history where blacks were seen in feathers. When the Native American guided the slaves to freedom and to the maroon camps safely, trust was evoked. They would make plans together to escape from the plantation, and strength was required to be able to go through with the plan. And when the men that were captured for planning the slave revolt didn’t give up the location of the escaped slaves, this demonstrated honor, loyalty and bravery. The feathers were also implemented in Native American Culture with the elders, chiefs, warriors, and braves in high rank would receiving an eagle's feather during a ceremony to honor their exceptional tasks and heroic deeds. This was later implemented into the current feathering up of the Black Mardi Gras Indians. The chief, who was most likely an elder, would have the suit with the most feathers. His suit would have the biggest and tallest feathers, and his suit would include the most detailed beadwork and craftsmanship to show that he was the head honcho in charge. Besides the Native American influence on the suit there was also an African one also. Beads are amongst the most intriguing and important symbols in African culture, they were used for prayer or divine communication or representation. Beads were also

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<sup>9</sup> Popular negro/ creole slave dance in Louisiana that dates back before the civil war



used as part of African rituals and marriages.

The Mardi Gras Indians have evolved over the years and has become a year-round tradition/ celebration for everyone in New Orleans. Besides being a spectacles at parades, they also participate in secondlines<sup>10</sup>, funerals, birthdays, graduations, Super Sunday, and many more special occasions.

***Question:*** *What did it mean to him to be a Mardi Gras Indian, and how New Orleans Culture is incorporated in Masking?*

***Percy (President of the Bayou Steppers):*** *The purpose of the Mardi Gras Indians, for instance, can be for a home going celebration for a loved one that passed away. If somebody dies they'll have an Indian there to celebrate their life, not the bad part, but the good part. To celebrate the good things that they probably did in life or the things that you can celebrate instead of mourning over them, you'll call for a secondline brass band. This is the type of service we provide for our people.*

The dressing of the Indians is more elaborate and the performances that they put on are too. If you were to ask what a Mardi Gras Indian was you would get different definitions from individuals because its more than just a masking and chant, it's a way of life. You would get answers along the lines of it "being part of New Orleans culture specifically the Black culture", "that it's a way to separate themselves from the white/ regular Mardi Gras", because historically they weren't able to express themselves in public. It's an expression that represents and cancels out the stigma of being an "Ugly Nigger". From the Indians standpoint they are creating masterpieces and when you suit

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<sup>10</sup> A celebration held anytime of the year with brass band to follow

up it doesn't matter how black you are or how white you are, we are all the same and no one is better. It's the idea that you are "God-Made" and you strive to be the "Prettiest", being the prettiest doesn't have a feminine connotation behind it, but it becomes masculine in this case. Masking is actually male dominated; to say "I'm the prettiest" now is a male dominated art form, because you have men sewing beadwork. If you were to go to Africa you would see men making beaded art and weaving baskets, this is the African relation in its modern form.

The raw unequivocal talent/ skill that goes into the suit is kept secret, even from family members. You never explain to people how you make the suit, they have to simply watch you and learn on their own. When making the suit you have to be creative and make it your own. You have to be able to come up with new ideas that will destroy the competition and wow everyone. The suits may have a theme to it, or a certain color scheme that represents something significant. The suit is a representation of you and your krewe, because whatever you choose will be what the crew has to base their suits on. It's not just a suit but what goes into it. It's more of a community effort or expression of life. These suits (not costumes) have come a long way. Indians get very offended when you call these suits costumes because the definition of a costume is putting on something that you only want to wear for a few hours. A costume is something you wear to pretend to be someone else; they are much more than that. What goes into these masking's are too respected to be called a costume. A costume is part of an alter ego that hides who you truly are. It's the difference between "dressing up" (costume) vs. "becoming" (suit). These Indians labor and labor in these suits to create this transformation to be clothed in this power, that's possessed by the spirit Gods. Unlike the mainstream Mardi Gras now,

where you put on a white facemask and get drunk, walk around intoxicated and are free to do as you please. These Indians take Mardi Gras Masking fairly seriously.

**Question:** *Can talk to me about the misconception of this being just a costume?*

**Percy (President of the Bayou Steppers):** *These men are suiting up to fight for their tribe. They wear this to show pride in the krewe that they are with. For instance, say that I may be with the 9th Ward Hunters and you know we are about to meet up with the Fire Woods from Uptown and you know our costumes have to look better than theirs, so we gonna 'put all the effort in tah' making this like worthwhile in order to basically fight in a different form. We are not fighting physically, we are fighting with style and class and beauty and beading and feathering. This is where you get your credit and validation from versus us out there fighting physically to be the better club because that wouldn't show anything. That would just demonstrate that we are typical "niggas" fighting in the street like we have no home training. We are trying to set an example for the younger generation to follow in those positive steps. We fight with imagery and beautification, they not just wearing a costume or something; they are suiting up with a purpose. When you are masking you are putting your soul into it, it's a very serious art*

Like before, the feathers played an important role in the Native American and African culture, so it would ultimately play one now. The feathers are represented as a spiritual role. When you wanted to think about God and beyond the human condition, there would be a word that you would say to express that feeling; "Shalla Netu", it's a Creole-French saying that means to "feather up your body", meaning the power to elevate yourself and look around and know what's out there. Some of the Indians are also known

to dib and dab in *Odu Ifá* (an African Religion) to elevate the experience and feel more of a presence when they suit up.

Besides the feathers the suit itself consists of other elements and parts. It takes about a year to make the suit and they begin their process right after Mardi Gras on Ash Wednesday, the day many Christians mark as the first day of Lent, the time of reflection and penitence. They use this day to give up the things that hinder them from completing a suit or hold them back from achieving the best suit. They give up the pleasures of the world such as Alcohol, salty food<sup>11</sup>, grudges<sup>12</sup>, and anything that will hinder them from making the best suit possible. The making of the suit is where the heart and soul of it is. This is where your creative juices start to flow and where all this planning that you have been doing for months come together. Mardi Gras Indian “Masking” means designing/creating a new suit, and these are made yearly. The masker wears a hand-beaded and feathered suit of original design that can weigh between 100 and 150 pounds at least. Making a new suit is time-consuming and must be planned carefully. An Indian’s suit may take up to a year to complete, starting with the concept of an idea for next year’s suit. Ordering materials, designing layouts, sewing, and bead work takes time and lots of patience. This is basically a full time job. The suit also includes patches that can depict anything that the masker chooses, but most of the time the patches are given to them from other Indians or if not they create them themselves in hopes of being passed down. The beadwork is entirely done by hand and they mainly do them themselves. The bead art and the plumage that is selected each year make a glorious combination of colors and textures

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<sup>11</sup> Causes gout and this won’t benefit them knowing that they will be sitting while designing the suits

<sup>12</sup> Belief that if they have a vendetta against someone then their suit will embody the person that they

that render the suit with such extraordinary works of art, that some are even now displayed in museums all throughout the country.

There are two groups of Mardi Gras Indians that are separated by location. They're from either the Uptown New Orleans area or the Downtown New Orleans area. There are distinct design differences between the masking of the Downtown Indians and the Uptown Indians. The Downtown krewes tend to use sequins and feathers, Uptown Indians use beads, rhinestones, and feathers. The only time these two groups of Mardi Gras Indians come together is to parade the evening of St. Joseph's Day to honor the Italian-Americans. St. Joseph's Day, the day the swallows come back to Capistrano<sup>13</sup>, is a well-established and extremely colorful New Orleans celebration observed by the city's Italian-American community. Its crowning honor is the surplus of St. Joseph's Day altars created in homes and churches of the faithful to give thanks to God for answering their prayers and special requests during years past. When these tribes meet, each Indian is so proud of the Suits they have created they have to show them off, and a silent comparison of their beauty takes place by all of the members of that specific tribe to the next. The chief would remove the heavier part of his suit, and replace it as he approaches another chief. When they approach each other the two chiefs would yell out in unison "Humbah" meaning to bow down or "Tú way pas qui-way" meaning "you are not to believed/ being full of it". It is a cross fertilization of cultures, the religious aspect of it is Catholicism and the spiritual belief is African and both of these come out in the making/ masking of the suit. The one that would bow down would be the youngest, to show that you have respect for your elders. If the elder wants to bow he can to show a sign of respect and gratitude

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<sup>13</sup> Country in Italy

for the other Indian Chief.

There are three important members of the tribe that have distinct roles. In order of appearance when coming up the street would be the “Spy Boy”, he is in front of the big chief’s procession. He has a method to signal potential trouble or the approaching rival Indian Tribes; he would signal with dancing, whooping, hollering, and hand language. His observations are communicated to the Big Chief who, in return, would send a set of directions and instructions back down the parade procession. Next is the “Flag Boy”, this person carries the “gang flag” (a staff decorated with feathers and a symbol). The Flag Boys are generally a block or two behind the Spy Boys, and a block ahead the Big Chief. Their responsibility is to retrieve information from the Spy Boy and return it back to the “Big Chief”, and return the Big Chief’s response back to the Spy Boy. By him raising the gang flag high in the air and using his signals, the Flag Boy is able to keep the Big Chief and Spy Boy in direct communication, this allows the Chief’s control over the direction of the route his tribe will take. The Big Chief controls and leads the whole tribe. He is the elder of the tribe and he directs what they do on the route, anything he says goes. When one tribe meets another each position on each side (Spy Boy, Flag Boy, Big Chief), they have a competitive art battle. This Battle is an Afro Atlantic trade that came from Ijebu Province, Nigeria in 1986 called the “Egungun Ancestral Masking”. This is a tribal dance done to show masculinity and strength.

When these men would get together they would sing certain songs a chants that coincided with African tribal calls and Creole-French chants. One song that we call the “Ribbing Song” is well known by people across the country, but it originated in New Orleans. This song tells the story of a parade collision between two tribes of Mardi Gras Indians. The

story of a “Spy Boy”(a lookout for one band of Indians) that encounters the “Flag Boy”(guidon carrier for another tribe), who threatens to set the other tribes flag on fire. This Mardi Gras anthem was written and sung by Sugar Boy and the Cane Cutters in 1953 first titled “Jock-A-Mo”, but later changed to “IKO IKO”. There is an alternative version for the song created by a Mardi Gras Indian Chief named “ Tootie Montana” that became popular and was added to “IKO IKO”.

***“Original”:***

*“My grandma and your grandma were sitting by the fire. My grandma told your grandma: “I’m gonna set your flag on fire.”*

*Talk-in bout, Hey now! Hey now! I-Ko, I-Ko, un-day Jock-a-mo fee-no ai na-né, Jock-a- mo fee-no ai na-né*

*” Look at my king all dressed in red I-ko, I-ko, un-day. I bet-cha five dollars he’ll kill you dead, Jock-a-mo fee-no ai na-né*

*Talk-in bout, Hey now! Hey now! I-Ko, I-Ko, un-day Jock-a-mo fee-no ai na-né, Jock-a- mo fee-no ai na-né”*

***“Tootie’s Version”:***

*“ Your Spy Boy eat raw pork chops, my Spy Boy eat liver. Mess with us on Mardi Gras day we gonna’ run your ass to the river*

*. Talk-in bout, Hey now! Hey now! I-Ko, I-Ko, un-day Jock-a-mo fee-no ai na-né, Jock-a- mo fee-no ai na-né”*

Besides chanting and singing the Indians would also dance. The family members of the Indians predominantly do “Secondlining”. They are present between the ranking Indians, but they do not usually wear suits. They provide much entertainment as they follow along dancing, singing, beating drums and playing the tambourine. When an Indian Chief is ready to retire, the tradition is passed on to their son or nephew and he would take over. With this position they would eventually have some big shoes to fill,

they would have to try to equate to their father or at least try to be greater. But there have been problems with this because most people are in a financial crisis and can't afford to do it or they simply aren't interested in masking up like their father/uncle.

**Question:** *How would you keep this tradition going? I've learned that this tradition is either too expensive, or sons aren't interested in following their father's footsteps.*

**Percy (President of the Bayou Steppers):** *"See you just said it, the only way they keep this tradition going is through family, so I just can't become an Indian. Like my dad would have had to be an Indian or maybe my uncle would then have to pass it down to me. But a way to save this essential part of New Orleans culture is to incorporate it into everyday secondline parades, or have a division for Indians who would march with the secondline band, that way they can keep the tradition strong. I was saying that if we come together as a Social Aid Club and support the Mardi Gras Indian culture a little more maybe we could save the loss of the community and the people who aren't masking up and the ones who aren't really involved".*

Even though this is part of New Orleans culture it is slowly going downhill. One of the reasons that people are so interested and infatuated with the Mardi Gras Indians is because it seems to be a dying tradition. When the suits were first made, they were made from whatever materials that could be found. However, the designs of the suits have become so elaborate and fancy that it is very difficult for many to afford the expenses. The rhinestones themselves can average around \$1000- \$2000, velvet averaging \$350.00, and the use of hundreds of beads and thousands of feathers; you can see that this could get very costly. People who have families to support find it difficult to finance this, but



they don't want to end the tradition. So many people depend on the Indians because it's a part of black culture in New Orleans. However, it is often a struggle.

***Question:** I was reading about the cost of the costumes and the price of material, I was wondering if you could expand on that for me please?*

***Percy:** Rhinestones alone are about \$1,000 to \$1,500. The costumes can run you about \$15,000- \$20,000 once they are complete. It takes about a year and a half to make each one. You spend the money over months, so imagine if you decide to suit up in 2018 you would have had to get stuff together 2 years ago, so basically you are behind schedule.*

The regular parades that are paid for by the taxpayers, predominantly the white parades, have people who design their costumes for them. But the only downfall about that is that the king has no say so on his costume unlike an Indian chief. The Chief of the Mandingo Tribe stated, “ My suit is ME! I do the patchwork and rhinestones. I only have people helping me hook the suit on. The typical Mardi Gras tradition, you will rarely see anyone outside of the immediate family and close friends have the opportunity to witness a suit's creation before Mardi Gras”. Most Mardi Gras suits often surpass the quality, intricacy and artistry of the typical Mardi Gras king and queen costumes. Seeing a Mardi Gras Indian for the first time is a wonderful experience. When you see the vibrant colors coming down the street you automatically know who they are, and seeing the Indians in their suits marching, singing, and dancing is basically watching art come alive.

***Question:** Have you ever thought about how the white Mardi Gras is fully funded by the taxpayers, but the Black Mardi Gras isn't? Why do you think the city isn't providing aid in order to keep this tradition going?*

***Percy:** “I feel like the city look at it as a party, even though I know for a fact that this culture is strong. But lately when people see these diverse crowds and the structure of how these secondlines are going, and how the media has a strong influence that plays out with everyone wanting to be on the scene, they feel like we just doing this to party. They don’t see the aid and the culture behind it. You have politicians running for city council positions that don’t know anything about Indians. Did you know that we have streets named after Mardi Gras Indians? I bet you didn’t know that huh? Most people don’t, just do some research baby girl and yah know ole’ Perc not gonna’ tell you no lie. This city don’t care for the entertainment and lifestyle if it’s not supporting them, if it’s not in the downtown area then they not going to entertain it.*

Besides Masking up and performing African Tribal dances, Indians are a huge part of the black community/ and the black culture. The Chief represents his community at various functions throughout the year that benefit the community. From traveling the world to do lectures and performances, then to come home and participate in community based activities with kids to show them how to create patches; Indians have had a long standing reputation for being a strong support system in the black community of New Orleans. Some community based projects include giving lectures in the New Orleans Museum of Art in the month of February to commemorate black history month, annual bike giveaway at the start of the school year so children can go to and from school, Toy Drives for Christmas at YAYA<sup>14</sup> incorporated, read to elementary school kids at the New Orleans Public Library, Host a Turkey Giveaway at Horrell Park to help families who are unable to afford a thanksgiving meal, feed the hungry at the New Orleans Mission and

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<sup>14</sup> Non-Profit Organization that specializes in teaching art to youth.

HandsOn New Orleans, and many more community based outreaches that benefit the inner city New Orleans. Charles Taylor is one example of An Indian making an impact on his community. He has been active through the years in explaining the tradition of Mardi Gras to others, and through the Arts in Education Office of the New Orleans Public School he has had the opportunity through guest artist residencies to assist children and teachers to better understand his work.

***Question:*** *What are the Mardi Gras Indians going for the community?*

***Percy:*** *They have a Mardi Gras division that go around to the community schools and teach students what they are about and what it means to be a Mardi Gras Indian. So when I was in middle school they had Tootie Montana as an instructor for an elective class, and it was called “Mardi Gras Indians” at Charter Middle School. They taught us how to bead and sequin and design a patch. What they do for the city is that they have this big St. Joseph’s Night to where they put on a fundraiser for the city and donate the proceeds to the city. And that’s basically another event that creates revenue for City Hall. There is also a guidance program that mentors kids that are having behavioral issues. If you feel like you have a bad child you can send them to the Mardi Gras Indian culture and they can train them and teach them how to be an Indian and trains you to have discipline. They have a big mentorship for the youth. I feel like if they take that out this city, people will go crazy because we have so many at risk youth that need someone to help them and tell them that they have someone in their corner because most of these kids fathers and mothers are incarcerated and don’t have anyone to teach them.*

“Chapter 2”: Erasure of Black Culture.

New Orleans culture is like no other. We have so many traditions that we can't even keep count. There are so many diverse aspects of New Orleans and so much culture engulfed in the city that we are constantly a destination for tourist. Millions of people flow in and out of city for its' unique take on literally everything we do. If I were to put into words what New Orleans is/ was I couldn't simply name them without giving an explanation behind them. Besides Secondlines, Mardi Gras, and Mardi Gras Indians, some symbols of New Orleans culture include Music, Creole Cuisine, spirits, Architecture, plantations, festivals, spirituality, our unique accent, streetcars, Cemeteries, Art, Movies, carriage rides, the French quarter, musical funerals, and the list goes on and on.

New Orleans is a city of music; it has always been a significant center for music with its intertwined European, Latin American, and African American Cultures. Music plays an important role in New Orleans culture. The city is the birthplace of jazz with its brass bands. Jazz was created in New Orleans in Congo Square during the 1890's, same time as the emergence of the Mardi Gras Indians. It's been the backbone of the city and has become very popular and has been recognized by many. New Orleans has produced some of the greatest musicians of all time, like Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Sidney Bechet, Ellis Marsalis Jr, Kermit Ruffins, Irvin Mayfield, Allen Toussaint, Fats Domino, Mahalia Jackson, Professor Longhair, Louis Prima, Aaron Neville, Leroy Jones, and many more. These individuals have put New Orleans on the map in some way and have contributed to the reason why some people even come to New Orleans. With Jazz being our biggest Genre of Music we have also innovated multiple different forms of music that has sprouted throughout the world. We have created a form of music called

Zydeco, Delta Blues, and Bounce music. Bounce music (a genre of music that blends brass beats and hip-hop into a uniquely New Orleans sound. It has recently taken off and has been highly requested to be performed at festivals and late night shows because of its unique beat and intense repetition. Today the city is a spot for up and coming musicians from down the block and across the ocean. Music is more than just a part of life here; it's the heart, soul, and foundation of New Orleans Culture.

Food is another aspect of New Orleans that has the tourist flooding the city. It's famous for its unique cuisine and takes on food. The food is very distinctive and influential. From centuries of blending local creole, haute creole, and New Orleans French cuisine, New Orleans food has developed. Local ingredients combined with French, Spanish, Italian, African, Native American, and a hint of Cuban Food traditions combined to truly produce a unique and easily recognizable Louisiana flavor. Specialties and creations that have been birthed in New Orleans include beignets, étouffée, gumbo, praline candy, jambalaya, Po'boy, muffalettas, dirty rice, gulf oysters on the half shell, boiled crawfish, and other seafood, red beans and rice, and many other creole dishes.

New Orleans Residents enjoy some of the best restaurants in the United States that cater specifically to locals. Food in New Orleans can be described as seafood based and spicy, but that would truly limit the broad scope that is New Orleans food. The food here is passed down generation-by-generation and spread across the country by the visitors to the city. As with any meal you need libations to go with it. Besides food we are also known for our spirits. The most famous one would be a New Orleans style daiquiri, a drink in a form of a slushy, but with alcohol.

Other than our wonderful food creations we have historical buildings that we are also known for. We are also known for having spectacular architecture that has dated back years and years. New Orleans has more of a flavor of an old European capital than an American City. The French quarter is one of the main attractions that tourists visit due to the old historical balconies and 17th and 18th century residences. People are able to see the decorative cast-iron balconies that cover many of these townhouses. One of the truly amazing aspects of New Orleans architecture is the sheer number of historic houses and buildings per square mile. New Orleanians seem to never replace anything. The Uptown areas, which include the largest historic district, have almost 11,000 buildings, 82% of which were built before the 1930's. Hurricane Katrina caused severe damage to the steel tracks along the entire uptown and Carrollton route and had to be totally replaced and re-electrified<sup>15</sup>. Besides the architecture we have some cool houses also. Our Creole Cottages and Shotgun houses dominate the scene in many New Orleans neighborhoods. The Creole Cottage is a two room wide and two or more deep under a generous pitched roof with a front overhang or gallery, it is thought to have evolved from various European and Caribbean forms. The shotgun house is one room wide and two, three or four rooms deep under a continuous roof. The name comes from an old legend that suggests that because the rooms and doors line up one can fire a shotgun through the house without hitting anything. Shotgun houses evolved from ancient African "long houses", built by refugees from the Haitian Revolution. Unlike other shotgun houses New Orleans shots have fairly bristle and Victorian jigsaw ornament, and florid brackets. These shots are as much a signature of the city as the French Quarter.

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<sup>15</sup> "Architecture & Culture." New Orleans Visitor Information | Visitor Guide, Maps and Deals. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 May 2017.



*New Orleans style Creole Cottage*



*Gentrified Shot Gun house*

*Original style Shot Gun Home*

Like most things in New Orleans there is a European aspect to it, but the famous above ground cemeteries are different. The practice of interring people in large, richly adorned aboveground tombs dates back from a period when New Orleans was under the Spanish rule. They call them the “Cities of the Dead”, and this continues to be an attraction to visitors. Mark Twain noted that, “New Orleans did not have the conventional below-ground burials”, he wise cracked that “ few of the living complain and none of the



other.” The dead are entered aboveground because of a situation forced on the area of the city’s high water table and below sea level elevation. A very famous writer, upon visiting the Crescent City, said: “ you can tell a great deal about a community by the way they honor their dead, and without meeting any of the people of New Orleans, yet I can tell you I know I’m going to like them, for very few cities that I have visited throughout the world honor the dead as they do here.”

Another aspect of New Orleans culture is that it’s big on spirituality and religion. If it’s being catholic, Baptist, protestant, or practicing voodoo, you will always have a place in New Orleans. New Orleans is known to be a predominantly catholic city because of the Spanish influence. Spirituality is huge and plays a role in everything in New Orleans. One aspect beyond religion in New Orleans is the practice of Voodoo. The word derived from “vodun”, meaning “God”, “Spirit”, or “insight” in the *Fon language of Dahomey*<sup>16</sup>. Voodoo came from the West African practices of the Yoruba religion via Haiti, where African practices mingled with the Catholicism of French colonist. People often have a negative connotation about voodoo and believe its all evil and it involves pins stuck into dolls and curses, but that’s only the commercial version of Voodoo. As a major slave trading post, it’s no wonder that voodoo made its way to New Orleans from Martinique, Haiti and the French West Indies. They established cultural blends of French, Spanish, and Indian traditions that made the city an ideal setting for the practice. The name Mary Laveau may ring a bell to you; she was a Quadroon woman who was a hairdresser by day and a voodoo queen by night, if you watch *American Horror: Coven* this character is portrayed by Angela Bassett. She served as a spiritual guide for the masses. Laveau

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<sup>16</sup> Niger- Congo language used from 1600 to 1894 in Africa.

caused voodoo to be incorporated into New Orleans rich cultural tapestry for decades. You won't find much of a trace of voodoo in its authentic form on the streets of New Orleans today. It is a quiet movement that owes much of its existence to its heritage and its history.<sup>17</sup> Since New Orleans was so big on hosting different festivals and of course we had to have a Voodoo Festival.

New Orleans is host to many festivals and celebrations. Ranging from the Jazz and Heritage Festival, Crawfish Fest, King Cake Fest, Voodoo Fest, Mardi Gras, Southern Decadence, Sugar Bowl, Bayou Classic, New Orleans Bowl, and many more. Some of these festivals/ celebrations are of the largest in the nation. New Orleanians are quite proud of this reputation. They feature crowds coming from all over the world to experience, crafts, arts, food, and music. These festivals bring in revenue for the city to be able to host more and more events like this.

As you may know New Orleanians have their own unique language and accent. Despite the city's French history, French is rarely used in daily life. However, its expression and pronunciation have highly influenced various dialects in New Orleans. Its unique culture comes with a language all on its own. As part of the city, New Orleans has served as a fertile home and gateway to the Americas, from the Choctaw inhabitants of the region to the French, Spanish and African settlers that merged to create the creole culture. The cultures that are comprised of modern New Orleans have all brought their own language and colloquialisms to the table, and the city has shaped them to form new catch phrases, mistranslations, and mispronunciations. The distinctive local accent, that

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<sup>17</sup> "Voodoo in New Orleans." New Orleans Visitor Information | Visitor Guide, Maps and Deals. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 May 2017.

we are oh so proud of, is a mix of creole and stereotypical southern accent so often mis-portrayed by film and television actors who try mimic us. Some of the words that you would frequently hear are “Fais-do- do<sup>18</sup>”, “Gumbo ya-ya<sup>19</sup>”, “Banquette<sup>20</sup>”, “Lagniappe<sup>21</sup>”, “Laissez les bons temps rouler”<sup>22</sup>, and many more other words that you will only hear in New Orleans.

I could go on all day telling you the different aspects of New Orleans culture and what to expect when you come here, and so on and so forth, but that would take me ages. The culture of New Orleans is very important because it’s the identity of the city. If the city starts to lose its identity so will the people who reside there. The ones who came after the fact and don’t really know the culture, are doing fine and living well, but the residents are suffering. The reality of the situation is that New Orleans may seem like it is thriving, but its hurting locals in the process. New Orleans culture is quickly being erased due to multiple factors that include the effects of Hurricane Katrina, gentrification, affordable housing, property taxes rising, violence, financial obligations, fetishization of New Orleans culture, appropriators, lack of interest from millennial, culture vultures, and limited jobs available. These are also factors that are contributing to the day-to-day politics that are erasing Mardi Gras Indians.

Do you know how people say, “all good things must come to an end?” well that’s basically what happened to New Orleans when Katrina hit. Before the hurricane New

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<sup>18</sup> Put the kids to sleep

<sup>19</sup> Everybody talking at once

<sup>20</sup> Sidewalk or elevated pathway

<sup>21</sup> A little something extra

<sup>22</sup> Let the good times rolls

Orleans was this live City that never slept, and partied all night. There were thousands of residents that filled the neighborhoods and diversified the communities, there were Mardi Gras Indians that graced the streets every other Sunday, our language was strong, and there were affordable housing for people, and the list goes on and on. But now post Katrina we are having those day-to-day politics that are factoring in and hurting the community, one of those problems being the police presence at events. The police have been the main problem with the erasure of the Mardi Gras Indian and pre and Post Katrina, but has had a reverse effect in relation between the two, the relationship has improved over the years.

If we go back a few years to 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit we all thought that New Orleans wasn't going to be the same and that most of the residents weren't going to come back to the city. In the documentary "Tootie's Last Suit" we see that some the first people that returned after the water was drained from the city were in fact Mardi Gras Indians coming to see the amount of damage that was done to the city and more specifically their suits. The suits were either missing or had water damage, and that devastated the Indians. They put so much time, effort and money into these suits just to be mere shreds is heartbreaking. These suits carried memories and stories with them; each suit carried a different spiritual energy. The only way that they could get over this natural disaster was to get back up, try again, and start over. New Orleans has had a strong track record with never missing a Mardi Gras ever since the tradition started. So it was only right for it to continue. February of 2006, only six months after Hurricane Katrina, you could hear the horns blowing and the Mardi Gras Indians walking the streets celebrating Mardi Gras as if nothing had happened. This is very significant in New

Orleans history because Mardi Gras and the Indians were the only hope for people, the only motivation that brought them back home. It was the only sane thing that happened in New Orleans. People were already devastated by the loss of their family members, memories, homes, pictures, and city so they needed something that reminded them that New Orleans wasn't dead or a lost cause. People needed a reminder that New Orleans was the only place you can truly call home; there is no place like it. Eventually people started to slowly drift back into the city and rebuild their houses and communities back up and started to see that there was a future for the *Crescent City*<sup>23</sup>.

Even though the city was trying to get back to how it was before the storm there were a few changes that were hindering New Orleans residents and visitors from fully indulging in the culture. There has always been police interference when it involved the Indians. Before Hurricane Katrina the New Orleans Police Department used to break up Secondlines because they didn't have permits. Tootie Montana went to speak with the captain of the sixth district Police Department to ask why they were being constantly shut down and before he could make it up the stairs of the building they were bum rushed with police threatening to shoot them. They didn't go there to cause any trouble, but to simply talk to someone in charge but they were immediately targets. Later on that month there was an emergency City Council Meeting to discuss the doings of the police department for residents to state their concerns for Indians. Tootie went to the meeting to speak, but had a heart attack and died in City Hall. This was a sad day for New Orleans citizens because he was a great Chief that impacted so many lives, and he died defending what he loved.

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<sup>23</sup> Another name for New Orleans

**Question:** *I know in Tootie's Last Suit we saw the infamous Tootie go to City Hall and defend what he loved, but died doing so. What was his presence like in New Orleans?*

**Percy:** *Right, right, right they said he died for what he loved. He was like all our go to mentor. Tootie taught a lot of these Indians and they looked up to him and they respected him. He's like the Beyoncé on New Orleans. If you go to Mother-in-law Lounge, you can see that they created a memorial of him and it's like the biggest one in the city, he's real major in the city.*

Everyone showed up to the funeral including all the rival tribes such as Creole Wild West, Golden Star Hunters, Mandingo Warriors, White Eagle, Golden Feather, Wild Magnolias, White Cloud Hunters, Yellow Jackets, Red Flame Hunters, and many more to pay their respects to a great man. Because of their feud with the Police Department he wasn't able to receive a police escort for his funeral because the Police Chief refused and banned a second line to be held in his honor. The community fought back and shut down streets on their own and decided to still hold a Secondline in his honor, but that didn't sit too well with the police department. They arrived at the memorial with the S.W.A.T team heavily armed demanding that it be shut down immediately. From this point on there has been a recurring feud with the police department and Mardi Gras Indians.

Before Katrina there were feuds between the police department and Mardi Gras Indians. The police department of New Orleans was predominately white males that didn't understand Mardi Gras and the Indians. They were blind to the culture and the history and didn't have the proper training to deal with them when they walked the streets.

**Question:** *Do you remember the culture before Katrina of the police department vs. the police presence now post Katrina?*

**Willie Davis (former police officer):** *The police presence before Katrina, cus' remember you had a lot of white police officers who didn't know how to deal with the Secondline groups and Mardi Gras Indians. Since Hurricane Katrina all the Indian groups and that they had prior to Katrina. So a lot of those issues have subsided and gone away. So most of the time now you have a lot of black officers who are on the street now and they are more able to identify with the second line groups and with the Mardi Gras Indians as well as the white officers because they get that training now on how to deal with those groups. Before Hurricane Katrina that training wasn't provided since hurricane Katrina, it's all about training and teaching your officers on how to deal with people, the crowds, the groups, the Secondliners, so all of that now has subsides. Can I say that its 100 percent subsided? No, but It's very close because there is a level of respect that has been built between the Secondline groups, the Mardi Gras Indians and the police department. So that respect has been built and there is a high respect on both sides.*

The relations between the Indians and the police before Katrina were much worse, because they didn't have a mutual understanding. Before Hurricane Katrina police officers used to insult and harass bystanders during Mardi Gras season. On one St. Joseph night officers sped through crowds and ordered Indian chiefs to remove their extravagant suits or go to jail. This Mardi Gras incident raised concern about continuing police antagonism toward Mardi Gras Indian and sparked fear about what might happen the next time tribes encountered local law enforcement officers. One Indian chief said that they

were told that they could not remain on the streets because they had no permits. This was a hot button issue to Indians who argue that they shouldn't need a permit to continue age-old traditions. On that dreadful Saint Joseph night reports suggest that the officers were circling the block and harassing the citizens and the Indians, an officer that will go unnamed, was calling the Indian krewes crude names and complaining that the Indians "are messing up my night". Wesley Miller, a Mardi Gras Indian of the Pocahontas tribe, issued a statement in front of city hall and said that "I think that instead of driving around with sirens on, the police officers should have gotten out of their cars and said, "hey, it's night time, it's a safety hazard, we need to get you out of the street." The police have a long history of targeting the Indians on flimsy or nonexistent pretexts.

***Question:*** *Do you think that police contribute to the black culture in either keeping it together or erasing it?*

***Willie Davis (former police officer):*** *Actually I don't think that the police contributed to it I think that the politicians have contributed to it because they are the ones that are levying new taxes, they are the ones that's making it so unaffordable to live here for blacks. So it's not the police department. The police department has a tough job. We deal with millions and millions of people each and every year besides the people who live here. Because we have so many festivals, police officers are trained to deal with those situations and they don't deal with that on a level of black vs. white they deal with it on a level of enforcing the laws of the state of Louisiana. I believe it's the politicians and the overall way that the city is run and how the city is now, there's no face that contributes to that.*



An incident was recalled where one Mardi Gras Indian walked out of a bar in full mask and was stopped by the police and told to go back in the bar or he would be cited for Loitering, a threat he said was fairly common for the groups while practicing for parades. The last straw for this police brutality/harassment was when a racist police officer walked up to a Mardi Gras chief, on that same dreadful Saint Joseph night, and held a gun to the Mardi Gras Chiefs head and ordered him to remove his crown or go to jail. One thing you must respect about New Orleans culture is that you never ask a king to remove his crown. That's a sign of disrespect and people in New Orleans already knew this especially the police. After these encounters with the police they appealed to city hall to talk about the issues of police harassment, and this is the day that Tootie Montana last words were "I want this to stop", as he proceeded to fall out and have a heart attack in City Hall.

***Question:*** *Why are Mardi Gras Indians and Secondlines a major problem for the city in the eyes of the police department?*

***Willie (former police officer):*** *Secondlines and Mardi Gras Indians attract a certain type of culture ok? People will go into a secondline and see the Mardi Gras Indians before they go to vote. I don't think that it's a problem, but when you get a bunch of people in that atmosphere and everybody is drinking and partying you are going to have some trouble. And what's really funny about that is, is that this is a very important part of the black culture, the Mardi Gras Indians and the secondline bands, you don't see white groups secondlining you mostly see African American groups secondlining and believe me all the groups that are a part of this want to have a good function and a good parade, but it's not the people in the group, it's the type of people that's attracted to the partying.*

*Fact of the matter is that they are held in poor neighborhoods and they are trying to keep it in the black neighborhoods and when the secondline starts and goes through the neighborhood, who are in those neighborhoods? Poor people. And who's in the neighborhoods? The people staying on the corners are the people who sell the drugs. It's a perfect opportunity for people who want to stir up trouble or who want to get back at somebody or get revenge on somebody to bring it there and what causes it to bring a negative light to secondlines and Mardi Gras Indians ok. So you don't see a second line in New Orleans in a white neighborhood, they always in a black neighborhood or the poor neighborhoods. So it attracts the poor people, the people who stand on the corner, who do illegal things, and that's just the culture of New Orleans.*

The thought of all the racism that they dealt with before Katrina from the white police officers and oppression that they had to deal with and have dealt with when they were denied the opportunity to perform in the streets or at festivals in New Orleans, these men fought with their suits. The idea of “busting someone's ass with the suit”, and having an outward expression without violence is an important aspect of being an Indian. During the time of oppression blacks were considered ignorant, ugly, lazy, stupid so to delete these stereotypes they came up with the suit.

After Hurricane Katrina people didn't really know how the police would react to Mardi Gras Indians celebrating in the street again. Surprisingly there has been mixed occurrences that have happened between the two. The mayor issued out a statement saying that there is still room for improvement, which is why the New Orleans Police Department we'll soon be inviting chiefs to help train incoming officers in the Academy so they can have an idea of how to deal with the Indians on Mardi Gras day. He said,

“We want to make sure that our officers are aware of the culture, that they’re sensitive to it.” One resident followed by saying “during carnival season, costumed people are allowed to be on the streets all night without having to worry about police intervention. He asked that police simply treat Indians as they do parade Krewes and other late-night revelers.” He said “ we are paying tribute to the holiday in our own way...I don’t understand how it closes when the sun goes down for some people and not others.”

Talks of Mardi Gras Indians having to have a permit drew an angry response from chiefs who pointed out that permits would necessitate tribes sticking to specific predetermined routes. The chiefs explained that Indian tribes are engaged in a type of stylized “war game.” Essentially a modified version of hide and seek. A permit requirement what undermines the entire tradition. After multiple meetings and discussions between the police department and the Mardi Gras Indians the New Orleans Police Department has agreed to stop following and caging the tribes with their cars and not to flash their lights or sound their sirens at Mardi Gras Indians, allowing chiefs more autonomy to police their own tribes. They also agreed and promised to identify and get out contact information for someone in the department who will act as the point person for complaints about New Orleans police department harassment of Indian on Mardi Gras and St. Joe’s night. The police are on the Indians side now; there is no humbug about it anymore. This current agreement was forged over several years through the work of persistent Indian chiefs, Police commanders and city officials. The mayor of New Orleans worked to remain in sync with the tribes, hammering out a consensus between members and police commanders and continuing to hold regular meetings and Luncheons to make sure that the Chiefs had everything they needed. It’s a real turnaround from

where we were and it took a lot of work and actual conversation for everyone to be on one accord. Some believe that the police are more helpful than harmful nowadays.

Gentrification is another construct that holds Mardi Gras and Black culture back. It's one of the main causes of the erasure in the eyes of its citizens who see it first hand how New Orleans is not the same anymore. But we can't talk about gentrification without telling the cause of it. Hurricane Katrina didn't only flood the city, but it also displaced its natives. Everyone lost their livelihood, was separated from their family and friends, lost their homes, possessions, churches, social organizations, over generational bonds, and memories. People lost so much during the storm. Homes were just the bow of this sinking ship. The storm generated a rise in home values and a new wave of people to come into New Orleans and establish it as their home. After Katrina the areas in New Orleans that used to be affordable were now overpriced and unavailable to the people who used to live there. Low income workers were being priced out of the city's historic core, neighborhoods where the working poor were once able to find cheap housing, and the future of New Orleans might be one where the working poor will no longer have a place in the neighborhood they used to call home. The pricing out process is already well underway. Neighborhoods such as Bywater, Treme, St. Roch <sup>24</sup> and Mid-City are not affordable for their historically working class residents. These previously black neighborhoods that were on higher ground, are now majority white or moving in that direction. Highly segregated or "mostly white" neighborhoods of New Orleans are the French Quarter, Central business District, the lower Garden District and other uptown

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<sup>24</sup> A community once anchored by fresh seafood and vegetable market that stood in a long, enclosed shed light building. It was the place where grandparents and great-grandparents talk youngsters to smell the ripeness in a cantaloupe, look for the clarity in the Iowa Trout and suck down a raw oyster before buying the sack.

neighborhoods such as City Park, Algiers Point, and Lakeview. Locals felt betrayed when they came home and saw that the neighborhoods had chic vendors of specialty foods, and emporium of boutique Spirits, novelty muffins served with exotic coffee, and none of these places accepted food stamps. Reasons for this spike in housing cost are diverse, and so on the solutions for the housing crisis. Post Katrina New Orleans residents didn't have a reason to have Disaster Insurance because we never had a hurricane of a severe nature so when Katrina struck it lead to widespread, and sometimes permanent, displacement. Though many people have found city hall to do more to help low income, largely segregated residents; New Orleanians, black and white alike, had taken a "not in my back yard" approach to affordable housing. Rents are rising, and pushing out longtime residents, and battles are raging at the intersection of color, Commerce and culture. New Orleans has always had an ebb and flow of new comers, with the import of these new citizens, New Orleans share of new residents has outpaced its share of new jobs in the region reversing a decades long trend.

Statistics released in July of 2016 by the New Orleans urban league that shows only 48% of the city's black men have jobs. Between 2005 and 2016, median income for white households rose from \$49,000 to \$60,500, but only from \$23,300 two \$25,100 for black households<sup>25</sup>. Thousands of people have poured into the city, drawn by economic opportunity and the city's music and food scenes, as well as the laid-back, almost European pace of life in the Crescent City. With the new influx of people comes an influx of new buildings. Small businesses and an infusion of private capital, which combined with billions in federal, State, and city standing, have begun to transform huge sections of

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<sup>25</sup> "Selling Off New Orleans: Gentrification and the Loss of Community 10 Years After Katrina." In These Times. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 May 2017.

the City. New bike lanes have been built, Massive redevelopment projects are underway, boutique tea shops, gourmet restaurant, and upscale grocery stores has replaced the liquor stores and check cashing places that used to be in that area. There are worries that gentrification would dilute the rich cultural history of New Orleans. Since most people can't seem to afford to stay in New Orleans they are relocating to different parts of the United States. New Orleans has fallen prey to disaster capitalism (i.e. Hurricane Katrina). This is the type of profiteering disasters that has been seen and the privatization of recovery efforts<sup>26</sup>. Gentrification is simply caused by desire for primary estate, so in New Orleans the job is the very culture that the resulting changes to the city is eroding<sup>27</sup>.

Before Katrina people were able to afford places in the Bywater/ Treme area. Historically New Orleans renters lived in singles, doubles, and small apartment buildings owned by mom-and-pop landlords. After the storm, many of these owners lacked the capacity to bring their units back online<sup>28</sup>. Generally, Neighborhoods that were mostly black before the storm and were on low ground, such as New Orleans East, in parts of Gentilly, has become even more heavily black<sup>29</sup>. Before Hurricane Katrina New Orleans old neighborhoods saw little turnover, but now modern-day New Orleans is not the same as it was before. Before Katrina New Orleans had been wrought with challenges such as the public schools being the worst in the Country, the murder rate was among the highest

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<sup>26</sup> Stallings, Lauryn. "The False Gentrification Of New Orleans." MadameNoire. N.p., 07 Mar. 2017. Web. 03 May 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Stanton, John. "Is Post-Katrina Gentrification Saving New Orleans Or Ruining It?" BuzzFeed. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 May 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Robert McClendon, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune. "Where Will Working Poor Live in Future New Orleans, If Gentrification Continues?" NOLA.com. N.p., 30 July 2015. Web. 03 May 2017

<sup>29</sup> Jwilliams@theadvocate.com, Jessica Williams |, and Dan Swenson | The Advocate. "How It Happened, How to Fix It: Plan Set to Combat New Orleans Segregation, Gentrification." The Advocate. N.p., 03 Sept. 2016. Web. 03 May 2017.

in the USA, deep-seated economic disparity between the races, and in the city's population had been on the decline for nearly half a century<sup>30</sup>. New Orleans today it slightly much worse than what it was before Katrina. The education in New Orleans has declined severely resulting in Schools with no teachers or principles, segregated communities, and violence at an all time high, resulting in over 100 deaths per year strictly from gun violence. The population hasn't fully come back because they fear that New Orleans will have another natural disaster that will take their home away. And people wouldn't be able to take another hit like that again.

There have been different solutions to combat gentrification. One way is to encourage development and investment in struggling neighborhoods, but there needs to be a balance if you are going to lose affordability and weaken neighborhood culture<sup>31</sup>. The government should focus on developing affordable housing on the properties it owns, especially in neighborhoods where high market demand is driving prices. There should be federal grants for economic development and beautification projects in transitioning neighborhoods, and should be paired with housing programs so renters and homeowners can stay in place as the neighborhood improves. There should be zoning policies that encourage the construction of affordable housing, like the one city Council recently introduced, and a strengthened neighborhood housing improvement fund would also help. There was a 2015 HUD mandate that required cities to try to make wealthy neighborhoods more diverse and to pump more money into Poor ones. Remedies for gentrification in New Orleans include recent affordable housing efforts announced by the

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<sup>30</sup> Jervis, Rick. "Katrina Q&A: New Orleans before and after the Historic Storm." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, 28 Aug. 2015. Web. 03 May 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Robert McClendon, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune. "Where Will Working Poor Live in Future New Orleans, If Gentrification Continues?" NOLA.com. N.p., 30 July 2015. Web. 03 May 2017.

city, including altering criminal background checks to make them more transparent and to reduce barriers for ex offenders to receiving public housing, reforming zoning laws to ensure low-income residents aren't isolated to specific areas, and improving public transportation<sup>32</sup>. New Orleans advocates hope that the new federal requirements we'll focus attention on the city's affordable housing shortage, which officials and housing advocates say is partly due to post hurricane Katrina gentrification as well as to zoning policies that keep multiple family developments out of certain neighborhoods<sup>33</sup>.

*"We cannot continue to allow prosperity for only a few at the expense of many, particularly those people who make New Orleans the great city that it is"*  
*- Elle Lee (director of housing policy and community development)*

This is a city where Black people are sold as property and gentrification could be a modern version of a similar inhumanity, a new ways slavery. 55% of a local residents who don't own homes have seen their rents and utilities rise by 33% since 2011, while income stagnate<sup>34</sup>. New Orleans is trying to become more educated, better heeled, and whiter than before; but this bright future is happening at the expense of the city's rich past. New Orleans, a decade after Katrina, embodies the advance of civilization \_\_ or the end of it \_\_ but the direction of the city is clear. In short term, "thems that got will get,

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<sup>32</sup> LaBorde, Lauren. "Many Formerly Black Neighborhoods Are Now "majority-white," According to HANO Report." Curbed New Orleans. Curbed New Orleans, 06 Sept. 2016. Web. 03 May 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Jwilliams@theadvocate.com, JESSICA WILLIAMS |, and DAN SWENSON | The Advocate. "How It Happened, How to Fix It: Plan Set to Combat New Orleans Segregation, Gentrification." The Advocate. N.p., 03 Sept. 2016. Web. 03 May 2017.

<sup>34</sup> "Selling Off New Orleans: Gentrification and the Loss of Community 10 Years After Katrina." In These Times. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 May 2017.



and them that's not lose.<sup>35</sup>”

In relation to Mardi Gras Indians Gentrification has limited the areas where Mardi Gras Indians are welcomed. Most of the neighborhoods that are/ were rich with culture is now predominately white washed. When there were attempts to hold Secondlines in these areas there was a public uproar because the residents were reporting that there was violence in the streets, too many people were on private property, and the amount of debris in the streets were over bearing. So after this the Mardi Gras Indians kept the sake of tradition and held the Secondlines in predominately black neighborhoods. But since these black neighborhoods are the ones with the most violence, police have been called to shut it all down. Indians began to get discouraged and not mask anymore because if they are going to be bothered or interfered with, than why should they mask? Or why should they spend so much time and money on these suits that they won't be able to show off? Since most people are moving out of New Orleans less and less people are showing up to St. Joe's Night, Secondlines, Parades, and Social and pleasure club events. The culture Bearers are also relocating out of New Orleans and eventually these age-old traditions will die out. The seasoned chefs that can't afford to keep their restaurants open, the Indians who can't afford to make suits anymore, and younger artist is replacing the once popular local artists who aren't recognized anymore. New Orleans is definitely not the same anymore.

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<sup>35</sup> Selling Off New Orleans: Gentrification and the Loss of Community 10 Years After Katrina." In These Times. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 May 2017.

*“ New Orleans was built on the cultural bearers in musicians that made the city special. If we want those traditions to continue, then families must have access to housing that’s affordable it all about neighborhoods. ”*<sup>36</sup>

*- Cashauna Hill (director of the Fair Housing Action Center)*

Another component that’s erasing New Orleans Culture and Mardi Gras Indians is the fact that new comers to the city feel as though they can appropriate our culture. Recently Mardi Gras Indians have had to copyright each of their suits due to an issue on Mardi Gras day when an all white group of individuals decided to dress up as Mardi Gras Indians and parade the streets of New Orleans. It was evident that most of the patchwork was copied from the chief of the *Wild Magnolias* tribe and the beadwork from the *Yellow Pocahontas* tribe. They were criticized for copying and appropriating the Mardi Gras Indians and after that day they had to trademark their suits. They had to copyright so that images couldn’t be used in things like calendars, promotional material, etc., without their consent<sup>37</sup>. Other than white people appropriating Mardi Gras Indians there has been cases of the Flambeaux Troupe culture as well. The original Flambeau carriers were slaves of the wealthy that organized the parade. After the abolition of slavery, the carriers continued to be all African-Americans and it was only until very recently (is still very rarely) that other races began to participate in this tradition. For their work, carriers are paid a small fee by the parading krewe, but the bulk of the money made from the evening comes in the form of coins or dollars thrown from the crowd. These men walk the

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<sup>36</sup> Robert McClendon, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune. "Where Will Working Poor Live in Future New Orleans, If Gentrification Continues?" NOLA.com. N.p., 30 July 2015. Web. 03 May 2017

<sup>37</sup> "Mardi Gras Indians: Can Cultural Appropriation Occur on the Margins?" *Native Appropriations*. N.p., 30 Mar. 2010. Web. 03 May 2017.

parades with fire torches for money. With its history being mostly male the appropriators are called the “Glambeaux Krewe” and they are an all female krewe. People have stressed that they have had enough with the appropriation of their culture/home by those desperate to be seen, to be hip, and be ironic<sup>38</sup>. The recent explosion of young white folks who wear skull and bones costumes is an experience for white people to enjoy for a short time and discard later without a consideration for the history behind the mask.

Historically these skeleton gangs derived from a deep desire to perform and contribute. The tradition has continued due to economic sacrifice of those involved, which appears to be lost on those currently mimicking the tradition<sup>39</sup>. There is also a new wave of appropriators in New Orleans, where white individuals are mimicking the “Zulu tribe” of NOLA and calling it “Irish Zulu”. These people dress up in white face and green wigs to copy the dressing of the Zulu Tribe who wear black faces and black wigs. The Zulu Tribe is another form of a Mardi Gras Indian, but instead of wearing the feathers they were tradition African dancing attire, and are African American men and women. What’s clear and disturbing is that this cultural appropriation won’t end anytime soon and that the damage caused seeps into every aspect of daily life. This occurs at a time when the city continues to enforce restrictions on cultural activity in African American communities while neglecting to bring social and economic progress to all the city’s citizens. How can the appropriation of New Orleans culture be so rampant? And why are people not furious about the level of disrespect an entitlement forced upon the community by this behavior?

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<sup>38</sup> Flaherty, Jordan. "Glambeaux: Taking Cultural Appropriation Too Far, by Gianna Chachere." Justice Roars. N.p., 01 Jan. 1970. Web. 03 May 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Flaherty, Jordan. "Glambeaux: Taking Cultural Appropriation Too Far, by Gianna Chachere." Justice Roars. N.p., 01 Jan. 1970. Web. 03 May 2017.

**Question:** I've heard some talk about how the mayor is trying to rid the city of secondlines; do you believe this will happen? And if so will this buy into New Orleans appropriating cultures?

**Percy (President of the Bayou Steppers):** Yea I did hear about the mayor trying to get rid of festivities, but that's the revenue for the city. Cus' the city makes money off of secondlines. Like I spent 5000 dollars on a permit just for us to roll in the street. That's 5000 dollars for the police division you know. You know they are making a dollar off of us, like I said the mayor don't see the positive side of what we doing and that's why I think we have to come together as presidents and social head leaders to show city council and city hall that the reason we need to be on these streets because if not the white people just gone take over. Next thing you now they gone be running the show. There is already racist shit happening in a New Orleans. Dey' have this thing called "Irish Zulu" to where they trying to mimic the Zulu club and they dress in orange Afros and white face. Zulu is supposed to be suing them and they called "Irish Zulu", that's the title look it up. You can't mimic a Mardi Gras suit; after every suit is made it's trademarked. So you can't try to like go and redo that, but you can do It in a different form tho'



Typical Skeleton Gang masking.



Zulu Tribe Masking



“Irish Zulu”, they wear orange kinky Curly Afros, white face, and grass skirts to imitate the Zulu Tribe.

Chapter 3 “The Big Easy  
Bounces Back: Celebrating  
the future while  
commemorating the past”

From the street painter making their appearances around the city to the internationality famous abstract artists whose work hangs in the museums, New Orleans has bounced back bigger and better in regards to the art scene. You can find art from drawings to paintings to photography for sale in Jackson Square, housed in galleries across the French Quarter and Warehouse District or displayed in the many museums within the city limits. New Orleans is a city that attracts artists and brings out their creativity. It's a city where art is appreciated and becomes a unique part of the beauty that fills the city<sup>40</sup>.

The New Orleans art scene has improved since Hurricane Katrina. Before the storm the Art scene was very local and in one spot. You would see artists selling their pieces in the French Quarter, in the French Market, or at festivals. There were only a handful of well-known artist in New Orleans pre Katrina such as Big Al or Linda Theobald. Most of the artists were older and well known by everyone in the city. If you walked in a couple of houses in New Orleans you would ultimately see the same painting on the walls, maybe not the exact same, but a different version on the same piece. I vividly remember this faded black musician with grey dreadlocks playing the saxophone. His hands were so big that it gave the illusion that they were coming out of the painting. Each one either had a pale pink background, a bright orange background, or a mint green background.

Most of the artists that were featured in these museums in New Orleans were not

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<sup>40</sup> "We've Got Culcha, Dawlin'!" We've Got Culcha, Dawlin'! | Experience New Orleans! N.p., n.d. Web. 03 May 2017.



local. There were artist from all over the world whose art was commissioned for these art galleries. There would be artist from France, New Zealand, Cuba, but not many/any from New Orleans.

The art scene after Katrina went boom. Modern day art in New Orleans can be seen everywhere. It's not just in the French Quarter or just in the French market. These new artist have made a mark on society and that has caused a ripple effect amongst others to do the same. During the first few years after Katrina sales were off for a time, but not nonexistent. It was hard to sell art because no one was in the city at the time, or they were too busy rebuilding their homes back up. If you were an artist you were selling pieces in New York, California, and other states that had a high demand for art. A decade later, and New Orleans has bounced back. The city has been through a lot from Hurricane Katrina to the recession in 2009 and the DP Deep- water Horizon oil spill<sup>41</sup>. For a city so reliant on tourism and conventions for its revenues, this represented a triple whammy. With tourism and convention bookings down by 90%<sup>42</sup> the first two years after Hurricane, you would expect that art sales would be also because the tourist are the biggest consumers of New Orleans art. Not many artists came back because their art had been damaged and they had no place to stay. They wouldn't have succeeded in New Orleans if they had stayed. People were still trying to get back on their feet and couldn't afford art at the moment.

After Katrina people were visiting different parts of New Orleans, were staying

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<sup>41</sup> Grant, Daniel. "The New Orleans Art World, 10 Years on From Katrina." *Observer*. N.p., 12 Aug. 2015. Web. 03 May 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Grant, Daniel. "The New Orleans Art World, 10 Years on From Katrina." *Observer*. N.p., 12 Aug. 2015. Web. 03 May 2017.

longer and going to different parts of the city that included art and this resulted in the increase sales of art also. The last 10 years have been filled with an evenly distributed highs and lows for the city of New Orleans in general and for its fine art scene in particular. Katrina's hardest blow was to art and antique galleries located in the famed French Quarter. New Orleans began to get back on its feet and people were replacing things, and individuals all over the country were trying to be supportive of New Orleans artists. A big project that put light back on the city was a program called "Prospect New Orleans", a now-triennial exhibition that was specifically conceived as a way to restore luster to the cities fine arts scene after Hurricane Katrina. The project was so successful and popular that the artist came back with the Prospect 2; this drew visitors to see the work of 61 artists at 18 different sites. The artists who were put in this exhibit were individuals who ranged from teenagers to elders and experience. Some of the younger artist featured were from my high school art program, YAYA. Some of the other artists were famous Pre Katrina artist who were just trying to make their way back into the art scene, as we can see its being dominated by younger individuals with fresh experience and a new look on life.



Jeffrey Gibson  
*"Here it comes"*, 2014  
[Prospect New Orleans](#)

An artist by the name of Phil Sandusky created a series of 40 paintings based on the devastation around the city, the paintings depicted houses sitting on tops of cars, Sailing boats on top of each other in bodies floating throughout the city. The paintings depict very triggering images of what happened. If you actually knew what people went through during the storm it would be triggering also.



Phil Sandusky, House on Top of F-150

This was the beginning of the “BOOM” of New Orleans art becoming a part of people’s households. These pieces of art became conversation pieces because they were based on the devastation of Katrina. Since then artwork made in response to tragic events had been added to museum collections and gallery exhibit exhibitions throughout the US.

We are so in tuned with the art that’s of the past because it shows that we are resilient in the face of struggle. We are strong when the going gets tough, and we will always come back to the place we call home. An artist named Kara Walker curating a selection of objects and her own work into a show at the Metropolitan Museum of art in New York that explored the immense effect that water has on our lives. Having been displayed in New York and in others states it put New Orleans back on the map and

attracted more visitors and also residents back to the city. And in 2014 a solo exhibition at the modern art museum of Fort Worth, Artist David Bates included painted portrait of Katrina survivor's. This also sparked up conversations in discussions about natural disasters. The reasons behind these paintings were in an effort to celebrate the future while commemorating the past<sup>43</sup>. Even though some of these pictures and paintings were triggering these haunting images of extreme flooding and families atop collapsing houses showed how we rebuild and recover.

A vibrant art community is restoring the fabric of this in indelibly creative city and restoring its future. Art as a form of resilience has a long history in New Orleans. The city's famous "Second line" parades originally emerged at the turn of the century as a way for black New Orleanians to consciously reclaim the public sphere denied to them by Jim Crow. This stance in the arts is partly due to the renowned sense of urgency, with Katrina acting as a catalyst for making people do things they had been putting off. There are so many different programs dealing with the art that has boomed in New Orleans, some of them being the Joan Mitchell foundation, YaYa inc, nonprofits, and the arts Council that gave artists a places to stay through residencies and financial support through much- needed grant money. The art scene has also improved in schools by adding afterschool programs that focus on different mediums of art such as glassblowing, painting, pottery, murals, and woodwork.

The duty of some artists is to erect lightning rod works of art that focus and amplify reality in the aftermath of natural or man-made tragedy. Katrina taught us that a crisis

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<sup>43</sup> "Zevi, Clara. "New Orleans Reflects on Hurricane Katrina." *Artnet News*. Artnet News, 31 Aug. 2015. Web. 03 May 2017.

could serve as a catalyst for the innovation needed to take things to the next level<sup>44</sup>.

Today this city is in a much better place than it was artistically, and is now much better known for its creativity than it was in the past. The mayor of New Orleans speeches hint a Utopian ideals with lines like “ we are not just rebuilding the city that we once were but are creating the city that we always should have been.” New Orleans has been on the come up and is home to America’s only large-scale International art biennial. Just as there are more local restaurants than before, There are also more artist and bigger, more diverse and experimental art scenes despite the city’s smaller population. Today the arts in New Orleans are incredibly vibrant.

Everything that glitters isn’t gold. Starving artist are still struggling from rising rents plus potentially changing noise ordinances and permitting laws, reflective of a fundamentally changing city, making it harder to earn a living. Artists who take form in the musical aspect are greatly affected by this problem. Most of the individuals went from earning at least \$1200 a month to only about \$300 dollars a month. Artist, people of color, and the poor are the residents who defined New Orleans music and culture, going as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> -century, when slaves had Sundays off, their mass gatherings limited to Congo Square in what is now Armstrong Park and the Tremé, terms for generations as “back of town.”

To some New Orleans is now a hot city. The new energy, stoked by outsiders and mixed with Katrina survivors’ resilience, is rejuvenating the arts scene, jump-starting it into a different rhythm. It is the energy of rebuilding post Katrina and recreating the city

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<sup>44</sup> Bookhardt, D. Eric. "Louisiana Art since Hurricane Katrina." Gambit. Gambit, 02 May 2017. Web. 03 May 2017.

in some way that gives people the motivation to get inspired. Art is contributing in the city's recovery by exposing people to different parts of the city that can be a site for beautiful art. By transforming a flooded out building into a venue to display art is being a contributor to the recovery of New Orleans art scene and injecting new life into a physical setting can be therapeutic to Katrina survivors. Another positive figure in New Orleans is a man named Brandan Odums who is only 27 years old, this black figure is known for his 2014 ExhibitBE graffiti environment in Algiers, Louisiana. He has plans to use the space as a backdrop for concerts, poetry readings, lectures, school tours, and other events. "I want to definitely activate the space as much as possible," Odums said<sup>45</sup>. Being part of the arts in New Orleans can be very beneficial to you. Having that status can ultimately put you on the map, and people would commission you to do art pieced, offer you grants and opportunities to travel the world, and be able to truly say you made it as an artist. The spotlight on the city after the storm highlighted its distinctive identity as a mixture of indigenous and imported cultures, music, cuisine, and festivities. For a few years after Katrina, artist of every stripe had to exercise ghosts of tragedy in their work, but eyes have turned to the future. Katrina still hangs over everything, but it's more of a force that drives people forward now, as opposed to something that holds you back.

From first hand experience I can say that I've benefited from being in an afterschool art program. I was exposed to different mediums of art that kept me interested. From painting, glassblowing, glass fusing, jewelry creation, mass production of chairs in hotels, miniature chairs, murals for school, and many different activities.

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<sup>45</sup> Doug MacCash, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune. "StudioBE, Brandan Odums' Solo Graffiti-style Exhibit Opens Jan. 18." *NOLA.com*. N.p., 07 Jan. 2016. Web. 17 May 2017.

Without Yaya I can say I wouldn't be at Bard. My mentor at the program nominated me to be a Posse Scholar and helped me with the application and Process. Without Yaya I wouldn't be in college.

The belief that the arts can change a child's life is something that I truly believe. It keeps kids off the streets, and gives them something to produce in the mean time. With New Orleans being so engulfed on rich artistic culture these kids can go far in life if they stick with it. You never know, but they may become the next best thing that gets created in New Orleans. You never know what types of opportunities are out there if you don't try and take risk. I was given the opportunity to design a chair that was put in the New Orleans Museum of Art and that was one of my proudest moments. I was also commissioned to design a chair that went into the front window of a resident of New Orleans mansion. I am proud to say that the arts, be it in the form of painting, masking as an Indian, or dancing, the arts change lives and this is one reason why I love my city.



## Conclusion: What Now?

New Orleans is my home, my stomping ground, my savior, my identity, my culture my very existence. Mardi Gras Indians play a huge role in New Orleans culture that dates back to slavery. Now society takes them for granted because we are ignorant to what the process is to make these suits. Kids aren't taught about New Orleans in school so they won't know that these traditions that they are watching in the street on Sundays have a long history, they don't understand that the tradition that they are watching helped their ancestors escape slavery. We are unaware that the erasure of black culture is also erasing our very existence and identity. The population of black New Orleans citizens is declining due to gentrification. The culture bearers such as the old chefs, famous artist, great musicians, and everyone that contribute to New Orleans being what it is, is being pushed out because "rent is too damn high". The price of living is expensive and the locals aren't able to afford to live here. There are limited jobs in New Orleans and most of them require you to have either three plus years of experience or a college degree to get jobs that will even pay you enough to afford to live here. This has been a major problem because the income for Mardi Gras Indians comes from people who hire them to do Secondlines and perform for parties and funeral. But if there aren't people hiring them they will soon be out of work and wont be able to afford those \$22,000 Indian Suits. If the Indians were to be erased I strongly believe that the appropriators would try to mimic the culture and dress up as Indians during Mardi Gras. Since the New Orleans art scene is up and coming it may attract the right type of people that would see that we are thriving to keep our culture alive. As a city we need to educate ourselves and become more aware of our culture because that's all we have. We have to remember that we don't have much in New Orleans because it's been erased, eliminated due to Katrina, or taken over by new

comers to the city. New Orleans culture is black culture. We have to remember that the African American perception is essential for the survival of our people. If we don't care about it, who will? As we can see now, water wasn't the only thing that flooded the city and destroyed it. I feel that most people are in the same position as I am or worse. Before doing this project I had no idea about the Mardi Gras Indians history or where the word Creole actually came from. Doing all of this research and discovery made me think of my identity. Knowing who you are is very important. This project has influenced me to volunteer at my old art program telling my story of being able to go to college off the strength of Yaya and expressing to these kids that there is life and options outside of New Orleans, but you should never give up on your city. I want to advocate for New Orleans traditions and spread the word to different parts of New Orleans about the importance of preserving traditions. I want to stress that we have to do our own research about our culture or in few year it will be gone.

**“ Uproar”**

The tears on this page represents Hurricanes A-Z,

Mold-infested basements,

Flooded rivers and lakes, wood in place of windows,

Soiled birth certificates

And social security cards,

Lost pets, losing their sense of direction towards home,

Stolen dwellings

Ruined Toyota Camrys,

The tears on this page represents the men afraid to leave and women forced to stay,

Volkswagen vans turning into lifeboats,

X-marks the spot of treasure

That's greater than gold,

Superdome parties full of sleeping bags and canned food,

Instead of Saints' fans and hot dogs,

The tears on this page represents Hurricanes 1901-2005,

Fallen courage of misplaced victims,

Non-responsive relatives,

Missing family members,

Lost connections,

FEMA no longer stands for Federal Emergency Management Agency,

But for no, no money, no assistance,

And not a thing

— Lauren Ingram, 17, a senior at Saginaw Arts & Sciences Academy

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